

ILDIKÓ ERDEI

CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOUL AND THE SPIRIT

SIMON-SZÉKELY, A., ed. (2015), *Lélekenciklopédia: A lélek szerepe az emberiség szellemi fejlődésében*, Vol. 1: *Világvallások lélekképzetei* (Budapest: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary & L'Harmattan) 23 cm, 540 pp., ISBN 978 963 414 001 6, 5990 Ft.

The first volume of *Lélekenciklopédia* ('Encyclopaedia of the Soul') is the opening piece of an ambitious enterprise. The project was supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) with the expectation that a decade of creative work would result in a unique knowledge about the soul and the spirit. The subtitle, in English translation, is 'The role of the soul in the intellectual evolution of humanity', and the series is designed to describe the most important notions of the soul in a multi-disciplinary manner. The undertaking enriches the encyclopaedic literature while allowing insight into the great religions of the world, and exploring myths, philosophies and scholarship concerning concepts of the soul. The aim of the series is to explain not only concepts of the soul but also closely related notions such as spirit, breath, psyche, consciousness, self-awareness, unconsciousness, subconscious mind, body, heart, life, death, rebirth, immortality, ghost, demon, devil, afterlife, heavenly world, and underworld. These are described from the perspectives of ethnography, anthropology, psychiatry, psychology, theology and philosophy.

Emőke Bagdy offers a laurel wreath to the editor-in-chief in her preface, and Attila Simon-Székely himself, not so modestly, considers the work an unparalleled and unique achievement. At the same time, although there are many studies in the volume, its reading may be difficult because of some editing problems I will mention in detail below.

The first volume discusses ideas about the soul and the spirit in five world religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism). Each study follows the same editorial principles, namely, the first part explains the history and key beliefs of the given religion, and then comes a discussion of the concept of the soul. However, this uniform structure upsets the internal balance of the papers. Too much emphasis is put on the introduction of religious traditions, and although attention is later given to theories of the soul, their proportions do not correspond to the title of the volume and its stated goal. Moreover, the reader initially gets a balanced picture of the history and fundamental beliefs of each religion, yet the issues that arise concerning the soul are not always mainstream. Thus the studies do not so much represent the orthodox view of the given religion about the soul and the spirit as they reflect the difficulty of the soul-spirit concept by incorporating

marginal ideas. This is most clear in the section on Christianity, which is much larger in scope than the rest.

The section on Christianity amounts to a third of the whole book and describes the history and teachings of nine denominations, including Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Lutheranism, Unitarian Church, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Baptist Church, United Methodist Church and the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement.¹ With respect to the scope of this book, it is too much, but considering the entire Christian world, it covers too little. It is perfectly understandable that an interreligious encyclopaedia does not undertake to present all denominations. However, the selection of nine denominations would definitely require explanation, because there are many more Christian denominations in Hungary, even under the recently introduced restrictive legislation on religious communities. So I am very interested in what the criteria for the selection were. As it stands, without editorial justification, the selection seems arbitrary, and a similar arbitrariness characterises the whole book. Legitimate questions may arise about Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, which also have several varieties: why were their branches not given an opportunity to express their characteristic vision, and why were Christianity and Buddhism, by contrast, treated more generously?

Similarities between Christian interpretations inevitably arise because of the well-established meanings of terms *soul* and *spirit*. Most authors introduce their topic by Hebrew (*ruah*, *nephesh*) and Greek (*pneuma*, *psyche*) equivalents of the words *spirit* and *soul*. Despite the rich semantic fields of the terms, authors agree and claim that *ruah/pneuma* means ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and, on this basis, ‘spirit’, while *nephesh/psyche* means ‘life’, ‘life force’, and hence, ‘soul’. Sometimes there is an overlap between the soul and the spirit. Only the Unitarian author argues strongly that the Bible makes a clear distinction: the spirit is immaterial and independent of the body (*substantia*), and the soul is immaterial, but it is always linked to the body. A Protestant author draws attention to the fact that serious conceptual confusion reigns in Protestant literature about the religious use of the terms *soul* and *spirit*, but the disorder is not worse than in other Christian traditions. The debate takes place around the translation of *Szentlélek* and *Szent Szellem* (roughly, *Holy Spirit* and *Holy Ghost*), due to the fact that the words *soul* and *spirit* are also used for other concepts in the Hungarian language. In this case, István Perczel’s excellent study must be mentioned, who reviews the history of early Christian interpretations of the soul. However, he writes not as a theologian but as a philosopher. His article, as the first substantial paper in the volume, constitutes a strong opening. In the light of his study, subsequent questions that arose during two millennia of Christian thought become much more understandable.

Fortunately, there is no great difference between the Christian authors’ basic concepts of the soul. Differences appear when they locate their theories of the soul

¹ The authors use the terms *pentecostal* and *charismatic* interchangeably.

within their own systematic theology. For instance, some denominations do not treat the doctrine of the soul within Christian pneumatology as could be expected. Only the Roman Catholic theologian, Liviu Jitianu says that ‘in Catholic theology the primary place of dealing with the concept of the soul is Pneumatology’,² and Calvinist Tamás Juhász places the notions of the *soul* and *spirit* within the doctrine of the Trinity (p. 108). Surprisingly, Unitarian author Csilla Lakatos still deals more with the Holy Spirit (of course, in order to be able to say that they consider the Holy Spirit the power of God, not a person) (p. 156) than the Pentecostal authors,³ who do not discuss the third person of the Trinity despite the fact that this topic is one of the most fundamental features of Pentecostal theology. Instead of Pneumatology, Mátyás Komesz and Lajos Simonfalvi place the topic within anthropology (p. 222). Further, these two authors do not represent the main line of their denomination with regard to anthropological trichotomy.⁴ They criticise the trichotomy theory of Greek philosophy, even if many Christians have adopted this view. According to them, the Bible does not fully support either trichotomy or dichotomy but talks about the human person holistically instead (p. 224). This viewpoint gains importance in the context of Pentecostal and Charismatic literature that typically has reference to trichotomy.

Gergely András Nacsinák, an Orthodox priest, also discusses the concept of the soul within the framework of anthropology, stressing that the analysis of human personality plays an important role in most ascetic-mystic tracts, and monastic practices focus on the most creative elements of the soul such as purity of heart and mental temptation (p. 92).

Most Christian denominations situate the discussion of spirit and soul within eschatology, and mainly deal with the survival of the soul through death. This seems to be the point where the different dominations are able to deliver their *spirit* concept in the most individual way, while from the perspective of pneumatology, Christology, and anthropology there are a lot of similarities. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church stresses, for example, that the soul is not immortal after death, but is in an unconscious sleep, and will resurrect only at the resurrection (p. 176).

In connection with the immortality of the soul, opinions are divided as well. The Catholic Church had decided in favour of the immortality of the soul at the Fifth Lateran Council (1513), but on the Protestant side there is no full consensus on the subject because some consider it to be the product of Aristotelian philosophy. Tamás Béres only tangentially mentions the doctrine of soul sleep that is often attributed to Luther. However, Béres puts an emphasis on the denial of the immortality of the soul (p. 142), trying to avoid the arising contradictions in this case. Not looking for a his-

² The original text: ‘A katolikus teológia lélekfogalmának elsődleges helye a pneumatológia’ (p. 61).

³ There are two authors of the Pentecostal study, although only one of them appears on the contents page. Similar editorial errors occur in several places throughout the volume.

⁴ I.e. the notion that humans possess a physical body, a soul, and a spirit. The model of trichotomy deals primarily with how the three aspects of humanity combine to form human nature. This model makes a distinction between the human soul and the human spirit.

torical explanation for the anomalies, he prefers to interpret Luther's opinion in the light of Paul Tillich's theology, which obscures the contradictions rather than resolves them (p. 143). So heaven and hell are just symbols for Lutheran theology, which is likely to be far from Luther's intention but reflects modern trends in academic theology. In contrast to soul sleep, the soul remains in a conscious state after death, according to Baptists and Pentecostals, and instantly enjoys being in heaven. The Unitarians' position is based on science rather than the Bible, so they deny the bodily resurrection. Eternal life has only a spiritual meaning for them.

Authors typically rather articulate their criticism of their own dominations than present the main lines of their churches' teaching on the topic. This approach keeps returning in the studies. Although it is undoubtedly a great advantage of the volume that the studies are written by expert religious practitioners, and thus every religious movement is described from within, it is inherent in academic thinking that not every article of faith is slavishly repeated but they are sometimes questioned. While the reader would expect that the writers faithfully represent the vision of their church, in reality authors do not shy away from presenting alternative viewpoints in the light of recent research. In this sense the studies do not always reflect the mainstream view. By incorporating marginal ideas, the volume manages to present difficulties of the soul-spirit concept. The authors sometimes question or challenge other religions in an honourable way, but their searching thoughts and reflections are mostly directed at their own denominations.

It can thus happen that a Catholic professor finishes his study, after an exposition of the real spatial and temporal vision of afterlife, with the Protestant Rudolf Bultmann's existential explanation (p. 76). As the author himself does not opt for either of those statements, and they are not evaluated, his academic thinking rather than a Catholic apologist's presentation prevails in the study. Tamás Juhász's opinion is more apparent when he divides the Protestant theologians and believers into 'majority' and 'another group' and attributes to the former the conviction that hell is not a real place and the devil is not a real person, so they deny the reality of hell and the devil (p. 105). To the latter group he attributes a literal interpretation of those concepts. In this case, many might disagree with Juhász's view.

As we can read in the editor-in-chief's preface, the encyclopaedia is a collection of studies, reference materials, textbooks and also an educational work not only for experts but also for laymen. But this time, the sum of its parts is more than the total. The essays are easy to understand and accessible to lay people. They are very informative and neat in their descriptions of the denominations, and the historical overviews of individual religions are accurate. The work can also be used as an encyclopedia, but the reconstructions of religious traditions' positions on the soul must be treated with more caution. They often reflect the individual views of the authors rather than the official teachings. This should not be a disadvantage except that the volume is called an encyclopaedia. It is true that the reader gets a clear picture about the evolution of individual religions, but he or she does not get an accurate picture of their concept of the soul. One gets the impression from reading the volume that the concept

of the soul is so huge a subject that it is impossible to make substantive statements about it. One should presuppose that religions have systematically developed doctrines about the soul, but the emerging picture suggests that they have not. Ultimately, the idea of an encyclopaedia and its realisation work at cross-purposes. In this volume, we can read excellent studies on the soul without an ultimate systematic picture emerging from the work.